

CHINA'S SOFT POWER

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The current Chinese leaders are eager to develop an original ideological strategy, capable of increasing the influence of the country's mass media in order to make a strong international impact. This means giving a substantial push to the policy of "soft power" which began in the 1990s.

The concept of "soft power" was originally formulated by American professor Joseph Nye of Harvard University in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990). It arose from the distinction between a "strong power" based upon coercion and incentives, and a "soft power" concerned with non-tangible resources such as culture, ideology and diplomacy, with the intention of influencing international institutions and, consequently, the international political agenda. According to Nye, the three key dimensions of soft power are cultural attractiveness, political ideology with national values, and the style of foreign policy.

Wang Huning (王沪宁), a member of the Secretariat of the Central Committee, was credited with introducing the concept to the Chinese academic world through his 1993 article "作为国家实力的文化：软权利 (Culture as national power: the soft power)", published by Fudan University. Other Chinese scholars followed, choosing the subject for their research and investigation. The understanding of the concept in China is certainly based upon the explanation of Professor Nye, but through the academic discussion, began to be applied specifically and to a wider context.

Towards the end of the 1990s, the realization of the discrepancy between the exceptional economic results of two decades of economic reforms and the relatively marginal role of China on the world stage started a strong debate on the urgency to assume the "mentality of a great power" (大国心态) and to "share global responsibilities" (共担全球责任). It was also considered a possible way to deflect the China-as-a-threat narrative which was triggered by Beijing's enactment in 1992 of the Territorial Sea Law which laid claim to large areas of the South and East China Seas. Such an extremely controversial policy made the world wonder if the inevitable rise of China would be peaceful or threatening to the regional and global order.

In the 2000s, the CPC began to include soft power issues in its foreign policy discussions. The Guidelines for cultural development presented during the 11th Five year Plan in September 2006 had a full chapter on how to spread abroad the Chinese culture. By 2007, at the 17th CPC national congress, the pursuit of soft power was adopted by then President Hu Jintao as an official policy, underlining China's need to invest more in its soft power. In 2014, President Xi Jinping called on the Communist Party's Politburo to promote China's cultural soft power—

by effectively raising international discursive power, strengthening the buildup of the international propaganda force, diligently crafting a system of speech for the outside world, making better and new use of the mass media, increasing the creativity, appeal,

and credibility of international discourse, telling well the ‘China story’, spreading the charm of the ‘voice of China’ and clearly explaining the characteristics of China.”¹

The Ways and Means of Soft Power

The main tools employed by China to promote soft power are the following:

- Cultural diplomacy, which aims at increasing the influence and attractiveness of ancient Chinese culture and traditional Chinese values. It includes various ways, such as the celebration of “Chinese Cultural Years” (cultural activities during the year) and of Lunar New Years across the world, the exchange of cultural exhibitions, sending Chinese artists abroad, exchange programs of students, cooperation among universities, opening Confucius Institutes in foreign countries, the promotion of Chinese cuisine, etc. All these initiatives receive financial support from the Chinese embassy and Ministry of Culture.

The program for Confucius Institutes was launched by the Chinese Ministry of Culture in 2004, mainly to disseminate the teaching of the Chinese language, to promote Chinese culture and facilitate cultural exchanges. At present there are about 500 Confucius Institutes in 125 countries.

- Economic diplomacy, which is based upon the undeniable Chinese success in economic and commercial sectors, aims at cultivating the positive impact of the Chinese model especially in developing countries. The model is not only economic but includes also the model of a “Leadership with Chinese characteristics” and a “New World Order.” The intent produces different kinds of links and ties on economic, commercial and social levels. Sister-city partnerships have grown at an incredible rate; at present, 201 sister-city agreements exist in the US alone. The financial aid—both the political use of investments and humanitarian subsidies mainly to underdeveloped regions—serves the same purpose.

- Hosting international events, such as conferences and symposia of different kinds and topics, which aim at building up a system of friendly relationship.

- Joining in and taking up the leading role in multilateral and regional institutions.

- The expansion of Chinese media abroad, with radio and television programs in various languages, the world marketing of Chinese books and publications aims at attracting the attention of foreigners and spreading the charm of Chinese culture. It includes also a greater interaction with foreign mass media.

- The development and adoption of methods for mass communication, mass persuasion, propaganda theories and techniques, the use of slogans, identifying the success of a celebrity with that of the country, etc.

Results and Effectiveness

In general terms, the Chinese Government’s investments in the cultural sector increased greatly year after year, from 23 billion yuan in 2007.

¹提高国家文化软实力，要努力提高国际话语权，要加强国际传播能力建设，精心构建对外话语体系，发挥好新兴媒体作用，增强对外话语的创造力、感召力、公信力，讲好中国故事，传播好中国声音，阐释好中国特色 (in *The People’s Daily*, Evening edition, 1 January 2014).

The 2008 Beijing Olympics was perhaps the best example of the country's pursuit of soft power. Its government spared no expense to project the image of a vibrant, modern, friendly China. To show the 'successes and the victories' of China was also the aim of the recent grandiose celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the foundation of the PRC on October 1, 2019.

China has invested and continues to invest heavily in deepening bilateral ties around the world and to put strong emphasis on innovation and development, in order to show its strength. For the same purpose, it is also quite generous in helping developing countries.

The results are visible. In Latin America, people in general hold very favorable views of China. This has helped Beijing sign arms deals, gain access to natural resources and come close to signing contracts on big infrastructure projects. But the region where Chinese soft power works best seems to be Africa. A large number of African students are pursuing their studies in China's universities. South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe have added the Chinese language in their national school curricula, and Kenyan universities provide courses of Chinese studies.

Soft power initiatives are met with some skepticism in the West and in Southeast Asian countries. The reasons are various. China's pursuits are undermined by its hard-line approach to foreign policy and human rights. China's aggressive military show in both the East and South China Seas raises doubts and opposition from neighboring countries.

About the Confucius Institutes, their soft-power cultivation has taken a step backwards due to more sinister allegations of their being tools for Communist Party propaganda (especially over the issues of Tibet and Xinjiang), meddling in university politics by monitoring students and dissidents, and even of espionage. Unsurprisingly, as a result of these allegations, several universities in the United States, Canada, and Europe have decided to discontinue their contracts with the Confucius Institutes.

The ties linked with China's financial aid to developing countries have started to become quite manifest, when the latter cannot pay back the debts, and they are required to allow China to control some of their ports or other facilities. This creates doubts among the leaders of some borrower nations.

With the spread of the coronavirus pandemic all over the world, and several countries putting the blame on China, Beijing's ideal image will be a hard sell in the coming years. However, at least, China retains the ability to use economic incentives to play down negative apprehension. Moreover, Beijing, by likely increasing its military and economic influence in Asia, will keep the hard power options firmly at its disposal. And combined with hard power, China intends to increase attention and finances for its soft power. Indeed the Xi administration seems to expect greater return from its investment in soft power.